

“Bring Them Home Now Tour” stops in Pittsburgh

Families of fallen US soldiers: “We are on a mission—we don’t want any more dead”

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One of the three legs of the “Bring Them Home Now Tour” made a stop in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, September 11-13. The bus tour includes participants of “Camp Casey,” the nearly month-long protest held last month outside George W. Bush’s Crawford, Texas, vacation home. Cindy Sheehan, whose son Casey was killed in Iraq on April 4, 2004, demanded a meeting with the president, which he never granted.

On Sunday, September 11, the tour held a march and candlelight vigil attended by 500 antiwar protesters, and Cindy Sheehan addressed a rally. Three national bus tours are making their way to Washington, DC, for an antiwar demonstration on September 24.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed family members of two soldiers killed while serving in Iraq. Bill Mitchell, 54, is from Atascadero, California, and is a co-founder of Gold Star Families for Peace. His son, Sergeant Michael Mitchell, was killed in action in the Sadr City section of Baghdad on April 4, 2004. Bill served in the US Army from 1971 to 1974.

Bill described what happened to Michael: “My son was a tank mechanic. He was sent to Iraq in May of 2003 after President Bush made his big landing on a ship with the sign ‘Mission Accomplished’ behind him.

“My son had been in Iraq for 11 months when he was killed. He was killed in the same fighting in which Cindy Sheehan’s son was killed. On April 3, he and all of his buddies packed their bags because they were due to come home in five days. He was part of the 1st Armored Division; Cindy’s son was part of the 1st Calvary Division. They had just arrived and they were to replace my son’s unit so they could come home.

“I just talked to a friend of my son and he told me how happy they all were to be leaving and that nobody among their group of 80 had been killed.

“The 1st Calvary was sent into Sadr City; that is a Shiite slum of Baghdad. Had they been experienced, they would have known they were walking into a trap. Had my son and his unit been sent in, they would have seen the barricades being put up behind them. But they were new. This was the first day they were in Sadr City.

“The call came that they were being ambushed, and my son’s commander came to him and asked him if he would ride loader. My son volunteered that day. He was killed by the Shiites who we were supposed to be sent to liberate.”

Beatriz Saldivar, 37, is from Fort Worth, Texas. Her nephew,

Daniel Torres, was killed in action on February 4, 2005, in Baygii, 155 miles north of Baghdad. He was on his second tour of duty in Iraq due to a stop-loss order when an improvised explosive device (IED) exploded and hit his unarmored Humvee.

“This was Daniel’s second tour,” Beatriz said. “He was part of the 3rd Infantry in March of 2003 that led the war. In January 2005, he was returned with the entire infantry for the second time. He had been in the service for three and a half years.

“The second time that he went back, it was because of the stop-loss order signed in October 2004 that extended people’s tours and said that they could send people back over and over again.

“When he was saying goodbye to his parents January 7, he told them he didn’t think that he was coming back. His mother, being a good mother, told him ‘Daniel don’t worry, you are going to be fine.’

“Less than a month later, they got the knock-knock on the door. His father answered the door and just started screaming real loud. His mother came to the door to see what it was, and she asked if Daniel had been hurt. She didn’t know that they don’t come to the door to tell you that your son has been hurt, only killed. The officers didn’t know what to say, they just stood there looking at her. From that moment on our life got destroyed for all my family.”

“All the justifications for going to war have been proven to be false,” Bill continued. “There were no weapons of mass destruction. There was no link between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, there was no link between 9/11 and Saddam Hussein. It is a known fact that Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda were opposed to each other. Saddam Hussein was secular, and Al Qaeda is a fundamentalist religious movement.

“Colin Powell pointed out to the United Nations where the weapons of mass destruction were and scared people with talk of mushroom clouds. None of it was true.

“When they couldn’t claim that this was a war about terrorism they started saying this was a war for democracy. This war is not about democracy; our history shows that we have put more right-wing dictators in power throughout the world than we have supported democracy.

“Our government put Saddam Hussein in power, he was one of our people. Only when the power went to his head did we decide that we didn’t need him anymore. It was the same thing with

Noriega.

“My son was killed because of an illegal, immoral and unnecessary war.”

Beatrice Saldivar added: “When Daniel came back after his first tour, he told us that we were attacking the wrong people, that there were no weapons of mass destruction, that Iraq is not a threat to us. When he learned that he was going back, he said that he did not want to go because he felt the war was wrong.

“Between his tours, our family took a vacation all together. We saw a wall with some graffiti written on it against the war. Daniel asked me to take his picture next to it. I asked him was he sure, and he said, ‘Yes.’

“One of the last times I spoke with Daniel he said that they don’t care about us. We are just a number; if we get killed we are just a statistic. I don’t want him to be just a statistic. Before he went, I didn’t know how to stop the war, we are on a mission; we don’t want any more dead.

Bill explained how his son Michael came to join the military: “He had been in the military for seven years. They recruited him while he was in high school. He is unlike the 80 percent who enlist because of poverty; I call it the economic draft. I was working for corporate America at the time, and he could have gone on to college, he had the grades for it.

“When the recruiters come, they are like salespeople, they sum up who they are talking to and tailor what they say to that individual. They sold my son on the adventure. They tailor the package until you sign on the dotted line.”

Beatrice said, “Daniel was 18 when he joined the military in May 2001. The recruiter came to his high school. Two weeks before going to boot camp he told the recruiter he didn’t want to go any more but the recruiter intimidated him, put pressure on him that this would be put on his personal record, that he would be put on a blacklist, that he wouldn’t get a job.

“We were afraid. We didn’t have anyone in the family who had been in the military, and we told Daniel that he should go, that he was only 18 and that he couldn’t ruin his life.

“Daniel became a sergeant. He wanted to be a sergeant so that he could treat his men humanely and not treat them the way that he saw so many people being treated.

She described the impact of Daniel’s death: “This just devastated our whole family. No one is the same any more.

“Daniel was engaged to be married. His fiancée is going to have their baby in two weeks. She is due September 20. The baby is a girl and she is going to call her Daniela Christina, after her father and Daniel’s sister.”

Bill added, “This has devastated my life, they took my son’s life. In one week he would have been in Kuwait, in two weeks in Germany and in three months was his wedding day. My son’s fiancée is now my German daughter.

“He was 25 years old when he died, just starting out in life. At 25 you think you know it all, but you don’t, you are just starting out.

“My message to my son was to watch each other. I wanted him to be fully aware of what was going on around him. The last time I spoke with him, he told me that he would be coming back to Iraq for a redeployment.”

The WSWs asked the two how they became involved with Cindy Sheehan and the Crawford protest. Beatrice told us: “When he died, I was the one in the family who could speak and write in English so I began to write letters on behalf of the family. I wrote letters to President Bush, but I never mailed them, they are in my trunk. We were worried that even though we were the family of a fallen soldier that we would be labeled as terrorists. The family was worried about my safety if I was to speak out.

“In August, I heard on the radio—it wasn’t even the whole story, just a piece of a story—about a woman, a mother who was going to Texas to ask what honorable cause her son had died for. I knew I had to be there for that was what I had been asking, even before we got the knock-knock on our door. I had wanted to know what honorable cause this war was being fought for.”

Bill talked about his experience: “I spent 17 days in the ditches of Crawford, Texas. Over 12,000 people came through Camp Casey. There was an outpouring of support and love. People gave food, camping equipment and monetary support.

“After the camp, I went back home for a week to take care of my house and pay bills and I rejoined it in Indianapolis. We then went to Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland and now Pittsburgh. We are going to Harrisburg and Philadelphia before arriving in Washington for the demonstration on September 24.

“I have always been against the war. When my son got killed, I had no choice but to speak out to the world through letters to anyone who would listen. Luckily, I met people who believed in what I said.

“In all that time and in all that speaking and writing letters, it was not until Crawford, Texas, that the mainstream came on. There is finally a dialogue in the country about this war. The war is now a topic for discussion. Before, people didn’t want to talk about it. Polls are showing that people are on our side.

“I think talking about the war is a very good thing. I meet with fathers whose children were killed in the war. I talked about my son, and they talked about their son; we bonded on our common grief. Maybe they supported the war, but we had more in common than differences.

“This is the people’s America and I think we are taking it back.”



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